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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTA #1991/01 2040811  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 230811Z JUL 07  
FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0158  
INFO RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1792

UNCLAS ASTANA 001991

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SCA/CEN FOR O'MARA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [OSCE](#) [KZ](#)  
SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: A LITTLE PRE-ELECTION SPIN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During the July 13-14 model visit of Congresswoman Shelley Berkley, the GOK highlighted its preparations for the August parliamentary elections, arranging two separate trips for her to local polling stations. Domestic media coverage was extensive, and pro-government media outlets emphasized Congresswoman Berkley's most flattering comments on Kazakhstan's democratic development and election preparations. Kazakhstan's arrangements for the visit appear to be part of a larger pre-election public relations push. End Summary.

Congressman Berkley Shown to the Polls (Twice)  
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¶2. (U) Congressman Shelley Berkley of Nevada visited Almaty on January 13-14. The Congresswoman traveled to Kazakhstan at the invitation of the United Jewish Congress of Kazakhstan and on the recommendation of State Secretary Kanat Saudabayev, the former Kazakhstan Ambassador to the United States. Her main purpose for the trip was to support Mark Seidenfeld, a jailed constituent. Seidenfeld was found not guilty of embezzlement after spending eighteen months in jail prior to the verdict.

¶3. (U) During her two days in Almaty, Berkley (accompanied by Charge) met with State Secretary Saudabayev, the Almaty Oblast Akim, the Almaty Vice-Akim, and representatives of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan. She also visited a local synagogue and the Kazakhstani Jewish Community Center. Because she missed a connecting flight to Kazakhstan, Congressman Berkley's schedule was truncated and a meeting with Senate Speaker Kasymzhomart Tokayev canceled.

¶4. (SBU) In addition, her Kazakhstani hosts organized two separate trips to polling stations, one a modern poll in Almaty with electronic voting equipment, the other a traditional ballot box poll on the outskirts of the city. On her July 14th visit to a suburban polling station, she was greeted by the Akim of the Almaty Oblast, at least 75 invited guests, and a host of media. The polling facility was decorated with banners and various instructions on how to submit paper ballots. Following several rounds of picture taking and welcoming speeches, Representative Berkley held an impromptu news conference. Although most of the questions pertained to her impressions of Kazakhstan, when she stated "according to the U.S. Embassy, relations between the U.S. and Kazakhstan are strong and point to a fruitful future," sustained spontaneous applause broke out.

¶5. (U) Berkley's visit received extensive domestic press coverage. The four national television stations, the Almaty and Astana municipal stations, and two cable channels devoted 4-5 minutes of their evening primetime news broadcasts to her visit. Three of the country's four daily newspapers managed to file stories for their Saturday editions. All stations

reported that the purpose of her visit was to observe the preparations for the Mazhilis elections. The official television stations highlighted Berkley's comments made at a polling station, where she said (translated from Russian transcript) "I am convinced that the system of electronic voting is simple, transparent, and elicits confidence that the vote will be counted correctly." The newspapers, official and pro-government, reported her positive assessment of Kazakhstan's political and economic reforms. She was not asked one question about the Seidenfeld trial during any of her press events.

#### Kazakhstan's Embassies Active

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16. (SBU) Kjetil Hestad, Security Advisor for the OSCE/ODIHR election monitoring mission, told Poloff that when he applied for a visa to Kazakhstan in Oslo, Kazakhstan's Ambassador met with him for ninety minutes to discuss Kazakhstan's progress, how Kazakhstan is trying to do the "right thing" in the elections, and how CIS countries suffer from a double standard in the OSCE. During the meeting, the Ambassador presented Hestad with several small gifts, including a leather-bound book on Kazakhstan filled with pictures of President Nazarbayev meeting foreign dignitaries. According to Hestad, some of his OSCE colleagues from other European countries had similar experiences. In Washington, Ambassador Idrissov sent a letter to "friends of Kazakhstan" in the United States soliciting volunteers for the OSCE observer mission through the U.S. quota. He wrote that "a personal knowledge of Kazakhstan and the understanding of building new institutions and political culture in a young society are important to be an objective observer."

17. (SBU) Comment: With the international community keenly interested in the conduct of the Mazhilis' elections, Kazakhstan's public relations efforts are not a surprise. Despite its public relations efforts, however, the GOK remains aware that there will be a serious, substantive evaluation of its election related conduct, and thus far has been cooperative with the ODIHR election observation mission. In a July 20 meeting with Charge, Lubomir Kopaj, the head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, said that he has been pleased with his team's reception from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Election Committee, and he believes that the mission is on track thus far for an effective evaluation of the election. These early reports of cooperation and transparency signal that the ODIHR election observation mission will be allowed to do its job, and will be able to distinguish "spin" from reality. End Comment  
MILAS